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## THE CHILD AND THE BOOK IN WAR TIMES<sup>1</sup>

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On the editorial page of one of our daily newspapers there appeared under the caption "Misguided Youth" the following quotation: "When I was fourteen years old attending a grammar school I read anarchist books till the subject became a passion. Books on anarchism and newspaper reports have given me the conviction that there is no grander thing in the world than to successfully commit an anarchist crime. I decided to kill some prominent Austrian personage and I have succeeded." This is a statement made by Garvio Prinzip, murderer of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his Duchess.

Since I have placed the foregoing like a text at the top of a sermon, you are perhaps expecting me to try to develop the argument that if the boy Prinzip had not, at the age of fourteen, read a misleading book, he would not have murdered the Austrian royalties; and if the royalties had not been assassinated this war would never have occurred. Please don't think I have read my history to so little purpose as to mistake a spark that explodes a powder magazine for the cause of a war plotted through two generations. I do, however, maintain that books, or the lack of them, have had much to do with making this war, and that the books we give our

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Library Department of the National Education Association, at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in July, 1918.

children—not alone our fourteen-year-olds but our four-year-olds as well—will be enormous factors in hastening or deferring the day when wars shall cease. I confess that not long ago I should have been the first to dissent from the claim which I now present as my earnest conviction.

Since August 1, 1914, no thinking person has escaped his days of black despondency. Only as one has been able to see beyond the battlefield a world rid of war in future has it been possible to keep one's soul alive. And to get rid of war seemed to me so hopeless or so far away as to offer little cheer. Written above the terms that men have used to explain the causes of wars—race hatred, religious intolerance, despotic rulers, commercial rivalry, territorial expansion, secret diplomacy, militarism, and so on—I saw in plain letters one familiar, household word which includes all these expressions. The word is *selfishness*. Greed of possessions, greed of power, power over the bodies or over the minds and souls of men—it is this monster selfishness, aided by trickery and ignorance, which has drenched the earth with blood from the age of the cave man to the present.

So, I thought despairingly, we can never get rid of war until we have so far changed human nature that a majority of men shall have rooted selfishness out of their own hearts; and that is such slow business that we may as well admit with the pessimists that wars will be fought every generation or two for weary centuries to come.

Then one day I came upon a thought in Jefferson's *What the War is Teaching* that gave me courage. Dr. Jefferson declared that we need not wait to change human nature before we can do away with war. All we have to do is to change men's ideas about war. There was a time when the most intelligent people killed witches by the hundred. We do not kill witches now. This is not because human nature has changed but because men have changed their ideas about witchcraft. Not long ago many of the best people owned slaves. Now slavery is done away. Human nature has not greatly changed, but men's ideas about slavery have.

"Ah," thought I hopefully, "that's good cheer, not only for me as plain human being, but for me as librarian. I'm not fit to be a Red Cross nurse, but here's where books come in!"

Yes, here is where teachers and librarians come in. The school will teach children to read—really to get the thought of the printed page. The library will supply books whose ideas are worth getting. Working together we teachers and librarians will aim for no less goal than to stop all war in the future.

Is it not a solace to think that we too may help? It is intolerable to sit in our comfortable homes thinking of what the dear boys are suffering to keep us safe and not be able to make some vital contribution to the cause. We who, by reason of age or sex, are debarred from making the soldier's sacrifice will "highly resolve that these honored dead shall not have died in vain," but that the world shall be better through our service to the children, saved at such a cost!

When a librarian argues for careful selection of children's books, most people expect her to paint in lurid colors the deadly influence of the book whose cover and title-page stamp it as vicious. But why argue against drinking from a bottle plainly marked poison? There are other ways of killing a child than by giving him strychnine. You may provide perfectly harmless foods, but if you don't give the right kinds and quantities and proportions you may slowly kill the child by undernourishment.

My library experience has led me to cherish a fierce and unrelenting hatred toward the so-called harmless books, the books which, read habitually, reduce a child's thinking powers to pulp and make him an easy prey to the leadership of whatever form of Prussianism flourishes anywhere disguised under some other name.

Because I am a woman, subject to the accusation when I condemn many popular books that I am trying to raise boys to be "perfect ladies" instead of "red-blooded men," I am glad to quote a man's opinion of the "harmless" book.

You send the boy to school in a belief that the stuff he absorbs from printed pages forms his mind; but out of school you may let him absorb stuff from printed pages that is not fit to be in a dog's mind.

Time was when you could tell a wrong book for a boy because it was bound in yellow paper and sold for a dime. Nowadays many wrong books for boys are most respectably bound in cloth. And they are perfectly moral, in the narrowest sense of that abused word. They describe how a fourteen-year-old

boy, with a discarded set of harness and an old hoop skirt, made a flying-machine and sailed around the earth; or with a leaky washboiler and two dollars in cash built a submarine that destroys the enemy's fleet; how a lad in knee breeches circumvented a gang of desperate criminals and so became president of a railroad at sixteen.

These tales of preposterous juvenile achievements are depraved because they are monstrous lies. They do not stimulate a boy's imagination; they **drug** it. They do not set his imagination usefully at work, but send it off in a wierd opium dream. They do not brace or enlarge a boy's mind. They lead it into a vicious enervating habit of dope-taking. They are a sort of psychological whisky-drinking that makes the victim unresponsive to wholesome, natural tonics and begets a flabby craving for the artificial kick.

I often marvel at the courage with which teachers persevere, knowing as they do the influences out of school that tend to undermine their work. They teach the boy to read and then the corner newstand supplies him with Nick Carter and Jesse James and The Amateur Cracksman, which thrill him with the glory of life as a burglar or burglar-hunter. In some parts of America he may find in the *public library* fifteen stories about Jack Harkaway, bold hero of countless practical jokes in which trickery and lawlessness appear to the child reader as scintillating cleverness, while teachers and all others in authority are poor-spirited fools. Once a week your pupil may bring home from his Sunday-school library (a wholesale book-dealer tells me he sells these to many Sunday-school libraries) an Alger book—and I have seen a list of one hundred and thirty of them—which stories, under a thin pretense of teaching pluck, honesty, and perseverance, practically say to the reader, "luck is the chief factor to success in life, and success means to get rich quick." Or perhaps this same Sunday-school library supplies freely stories having the honorable name "Boy Scout" on the title-page, whose contents are totally false to Boy Scout ideals. Have you heard, by the way, of the German propaganda carried on in Boy Scout story form until Mr. Mathiews discovered and the Department of Justice stopped it?

When the above-mentioned sources of supply fail, one of the neighbors lends your lad the first of the Motor Boys series and thereupon—a friend of mine wrote this of her son—he reads nineteen motor stories in nineteen days and is a long time recovering

from the debauch. And finally comes Christmas, when Uncle Tom presents the youngster with Mark Twain's immortal *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, works of genius as far removed in point of literary power from the mediocre stuff I have named as the mountain top is from the gutter, yet which, from another point of view, are at least open to question as to their harmlessness.

I know that in raising this question I shall once more be accused of having no sense of humor—and you can say only one worse thing of a person, call her pro-German! Well, if I must choose between the two I own I'd rather have a sense of honor than a sense of humor even; and I am glad to find that Paul Elmer More in *The Nation* expresses the very doubt that I feel about the influence of these Clemens books, tiptop reading for older people, upon young boys. Mr. More says:

And there is another class of children's books which are not only enfeebling in their effect on the mind, but actually perverting in their effect on character. Of this class the most notable example is *Tom Sawyer*. Now, again, I am making no claim for the goody-goody style of the old Sunday-school library, and nobody wishes to see boys combed into prigs. But there is a happy medium in these things, as in all others; and I see no reason in going to the other extreme and praising stories that draw their interest from a contrast between the obedient sneak and coward on the one hand, and on the other the victorious liar, lucky vagabond, cunning rebel to authority, which sums up the character of Mark Twain's hero. I can laugh at the exploits of Tom with anybody, but I do not see any profit—in fact, I see the danger of real mischief—in feeding youth with such an inversion of the facts of life. Why should we go out of our way to encourage traits which are likely to be overstrong without our aid? It is perfectly possible to portray a genuine boy, full of invention, quick with the natural restiveness of youth, yet to lay emphasis on the duty of finding one's self in the obligations of home and the advantages of school.

I have alluded thus far only to "the boy." I throw up my hands in despair when I turn to the froth swallowed by our girls—the Elsie Dinsmores, the Dorothy Dainties, the Patty Fairfields, the Meade, Blanchard, and other stories of sloppy, shoddy, empty-headed girl heroines.

When I think of our gallant boys dying to save the silly women who must have their powder-puffs, their silk stockings, a different sweater for every costume though the soldiers freeze in the trenches, I rage at the sacrifice for such unworthy creatures. And then my

sense of fairness makes me ask, "What right have we to expect their brains to develop into thinking organs at twenty if we let girls consume habitually the kind of mind food that could not possibly have any other effect than to weaken and ultimately destroy mental muscle?"

Good people are quite apt to forget that it takes brains as well as hearts and consciences to make a strong character. Never in the world's history was it so important as now for us to train our children to think clearly, wisely, courageously. And teachers will agree with wise Sir Josuha Reynolds that "There is no expedient to which man will not resort to evade the real labor of thinking!" What world-problems must be met by these boys and girls a few years hence! It is criminal waste for us to let them loaf away their reading hours on weak story-books which may be morally clean but which crowd out the fine, high, strong, nobly written child literature necessary to broaden and deepen and strengthen young minds and hearts.

Reports of what the draft is revealing of complete lack of any reading, of dense ignorance in fact, in this land boastful of its public-school system, point to the need of immediate educational extension measures. The large percentage of men rejected for physical defects easily preventable had parents been readers of books on the care and feeding of children, the young men in camp who cannot speak English, who cannot read or write, who do not know their right hand from their left—reports of these must give joy to the Kaiser! You remember the gentle old lady who said, when her family made harsh remarks about the Devil, "Well, I've always thought we might imitate him in one trait—his perseverance." We Americans must imitate the present representative of His Satanic Majesty by putting thoroughness and efficiency as well as American ideals into the training of our children, unpopular though any Prussian-sounding words are in these days.

Teachers know that there are states which on a public-school map of the Union are marked black. Librarians know that many more states would be blotted out on a map showing public-library activity. Why bother to teach children to read if, after they learn, they are never to have access to good books? Unless a com-

munity adds to first-class schools public libraries of the most progressive sort, its educational system is defective.

We cannot afford to let children grow up without good reading. We hear much nowadays about the "international mind." You and I know many people who show the kindest of hearts when their nextdoor neighbor is in trouble, but who are coldly indifferent to suffering far away. Their hearts are unselfish, their minds are selfish. Such people, you will almost certainly find, have not grown up from babyhood with picture-book and folk-tale and story, with legend and song and hero-history, of the sort that makes all the world neighbors. There is a time for opening windows in the child's mind through his imagination, and if we do not begin early the child may live his life in a windowless prison of narrow-mindedness. There is no surer way to thrill the hearts of our American children with the touch of the world's gallantry and lovely hearts than by feeding them with stories gathered from the best thought of all countries and times.

It is not my purpose to discuss war books for children but to urge teachers and librarians to unite to get books to children; to urge that we agitate and do not stop agitating until every child in America, whether he live in the isolation of mountain cove or desert reach, in crowded slum or enervating palace, on snowy plain or sunny plantation, shall have the best books to read. I cannot, however, leave the subject of "The Child and the Book in War Times" without saying something of the sort of war books we are to allow our children to read.

Some time ago I rode up from downtown in a crowded trolley. Standing near a little mother who could barely reach the strap, I, with my long arms, helped keep her and her six-year-old youngster from being thrown to the floor of the swaying car. So when we got off at the same corner and walked a block together we became quite sociable. The little woman proudly told of her brother who had enlisted as soon as war was declared, and I as proudly told of my nephew who had done the same. Just as we were separating the little woman said of her small boy, teasingly, "Johnny here, he *loves* the Germans. Don't you, Johnny?" To which Johnny instantly replied with intense heat, "No! I don't! I *hate* the



Germans!" And the mother gave me a laughing look which plainly said, "See how I am teaching patriotism to my baby?"

In almost any other audience I should expect to be hissed for begging that while we teach our children to hate the government which breaks treaties, bombs hospitals, schools, and churches, and in general wages war in a way to make a cannibal blush—while rousing children to a white-hot resolution to help exterminate the devilish leaders in this business—we will not let our boys and girls grow up hating the German people. Just as surely as we plant this bitter prejudice in the breasts of our children we shall sow seeds for future wars. Shall we never learn the foolishness, the costliness—I say nothing of the wickedness—of hate? Why are those German boys in their teens and twenties fighting for their country? For exactly the same reason that my nephew and my young cousins and the sons of all my friends are fighting for America—because they believe it is their duty. *They believe what they have been taught by their elders to believe.*

Fifty years ago some of your families were fighting members of my family. I know there are people living who grew to be big children before they found out that not all Yankees have horns and hoofs nor spend their time slashing portraits and stealing family silver. Why did your family fight for the Confederacy and mine for the Union? Mainly because yours lived south of Mason and Dixon's line and mine north of it. Of course German boys fight for their country, but some day we shall hear from the now silent German people that there were those who did not gloat over the sinking of the "Lusitania," who had no real conception of the facts about Germany's entry into or manner of conducting the war.

Because children are remarkably keen and fair-minded in grasping distinctions of this sort it will not be hard to make them see the necessity, on the one hand, of conquering Germany, and the importance, on the other, of doing this without hate, but with a readiness to make friends with the German people as soon as they rid themselves of their rulers.

Let us scrutinize every child's book touching upon the war with the thought of its effect upon the reader's life-prejudices. Let us give no encouragement, either, to the author who tosses off a

shallow battle thriller for youths in order to put money into his pocket. Only a person filled with serious and honest purpose should be allowed to speak to our children through stories of the present war.

My time limit has enabled me merely to hint at principles and I have said more *against* bad books than *for* good ones. This does not illustrate our practice with the children, whose library shelves we fill with alluring books of the wholesome type, believing with you that the best way to drive out the bad is to fill the child with good. I hope some of you will ask me to send you the positive side to my "Don'ts" in the form of lists of those best books which should be read by every child in America.

Knowing how overworked the conscientious teacher is I would not be a party to the suggestion that she assume responsibility for making these best books accessible to her pupils were it not for my belief that in so doing she will, in the long run, lighten her own load. There are splendid public libraries, unused by teachers, which could help the latter immensely, and a mere word from the teacher will send her pupils flocking to the library for books which will brighten the children's minds and so make teaching more interesting. If you come from a backward-library state I don't see anything for you to do, to save your own work from being undone, but to agitate for good libraries.

Once a young book agent came to my office. I don't usually give much time to agents, but this one interested me, he was so "fresh." He bragged about his ability to sell any sort of book-trash, even to the public librarians in many sections of the country.

"How do you succeed with that kind of sales in Wisconsin?" I asked.

"Oh, you can't fool them!" he answered instantly.

"How about Ohio?" said I.

"Oh, you can't fool them either," said he.

After naming a few other progressive states, which brought the same answer, I asked about several which, from a library point of view, are still in their dark ages.

"Oh, I can sell any old stuff in those states," was the reply.

Well, if I were a teacher in a state of which an ill-educated youth could say such a thing I think I'd want to know the reason why. I should probably write to the League of Library Commissions for light on the subject, asking advice about bringing my state up into the ranks of those that cannot be easily fooled by a shallow agent.

In Brooklyn, where I live, we have a wonderful library. All of its readers are children under high-school age. It is no uncommon thing in this children's branch to circulate nearly two thousand in a winter afternoon. Most of the boy and girl readers have foreign-born fathers and mothers, but you mustn't call the children foreigners—oh, no! Once a librarian made a mistake. She said to a little girl, "You are of the Jewish race, aren't you, Becky?" The child drew herself up with offended dignity. "No," said she distinctly, "I am an American citizen."

One of these American citizens is a poet. He is nine years old. He showed the librarian a poem he had written to help his school in a recent war drive. Here is his composition:

The German Kaiser is pressing on;  
A merciless thing is he;  
So we must buy a Thrift Stamp a day  
And help Democracy.

I am sure that our poet, who is devoted to the library, would not object to my paraphrasing his suggestive lines, for our cause. I wish we might march out from this meeting under a banner inscribed with the following as a slogan:

The German Kaiser is pressing on;  
A merciless thing is he;  
So we will sow broadcast good books every day  
To help Democracy!